

US Senate reconvenes to push return to work and social cuts

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The United States Senate reconvened Monday after a five-week absence from the nation's Capitol. It last met to pass by a unanimous 96-0 vote—including the votes of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren—the most massive corporate bailout in world history: the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act.

The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives followed suit less than 48 hours later in a voice vote, paving the way for a record 30 percent surge in the Dow Jones Industrial Average during the month of April.

The Republican-controlled Senate returned to the Capitol despite an ongoing spike in coronavirus infections and deaths in Washington DC and its environs, and a stay-at-home order in the capital that extends until May 16. The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives had also been scheduled to reconvene on Monday, but, on the advice of the House's doctor and amid opposition from some representatives, decided to postpone its resumption of operations in the Capitol.

The Senate's reopening followed President Trump's Sunday evening virtual "town hall" staged at the Lincoln Memorial and broadcast by Fox News. Titled "America Together Returning to Work," the event was a platform for Trump to use demagoguery and lies to justify forcing workers back to work under potentially deadly conditions.

He dismissed strikes and protests by workers against unsafe conditions, including at meat packing plants around the country, where more than 5,000 COVID-19 infections have been reported and at least 20 workers have succumbed to the disease.

During the event, both Trump and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin poured cold water on previous assurances that financial aid to states and localities facing massive pandemic-related deficits would be included in a new stimulus bill to be negotiated between the White House and Congress. Mnuchin said, "We're not looking to bail out states that were poorly managed."

Trump also announced that he would not support any bill that did not include a payroll tax cut. This measure would provide a further tax windfall for the wealthy while slashing revenues for Social Security and Medicare, which are funded by the tax on workers and employers.

In a joint statement, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Republican House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy added the demand that the next bill relieve businesses of legal liability for causing disease or death to employees by failing to provide a safe work environment. This would effectively cut off all legal avenues for workers and family members to sue companies for jeopardizing their health and lives, essentially giving businesses a green light to work employees to death in the midst of the pandemic.

That the securing of such legal immunity is considered a critical issue by corporations preparing to force millions of workers back into factories, offices and other workplaces is indicated by Monday's edition of the Democratic-aligned *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos.

The lead news article, "Virus revives liability battles: Worker suits a worry as economy reopens," reports that the return-to-work drive has unleashed a frenzy of corporate lobbying for immunity from liability by many corporations and employers' groups. Among those demanding protection are the National Association of Manufacturers and US Chamber of Commerce.

Multiple pandemic-related lawsuits have already been filed against businesses, including Wal-Mart, nursing homes, insurers and others, and more are expected, the newspaper reported.

Republican Texas Senator John Cornyn is drawing up a bill to shield businesses and has suggested a federal fund to pay out claims. The White House is backing the effort. Trump's chief economic adviser Larry Kudlow recently told the business channel CNBC that businesses should

not have to worry about “trial lawyers putting on false lawsuits.”

The *Post* editorial was titled “Exploiting a crisis: Mr. McConnell should not use the pandemic to advance his ‘tort reform’ agenda.” However, it actually argued in favor of precisely that.

Noting that “Corporations have been spooked by the suit pending on behalf of workers at a Smithfield meatpacking plant in Missouri, which alleges that many employees are at risk of being infected because of the company’s failure to provide adequate protective gear or social distancing.” It went on to state, “Given the medical and scientific uncertainty still surrounding the coronavirus, even quite conscientious employers—the majority, to be sure—may find it hard to comprehend their legal responsibilities, let alone meet them... there may be a case for additional protection from lawsuits for the duration of the crisis.” In the end, it called on Senate Democrats to negotiate the issue with McConnell.

Workers at scores of Amazon facilities have tested positive for COVID-19, and at least one worker has died. Amazon has rejected workers’ demands that warehouses and distribution centers be properly cleaned, and workers provided with proper PPE and a safe work environment. Workers who have protested or spoken out have been fired.

Last month, the Democrats backed a bill to inject an additional \$310 billion into the “small business” Payroll Protection Program (PPP), a section of the CARES Act supposedly aimed at aiding small employers and their workers. The initial \$349 billion in funding for the program ran out of cash in less than two weeks, as large, well-connected businesses gobbled up more than \$1 billion in loans, Wall Street banks took in \$10 billion in loan processing fees, and the vast majority family-owned firms that applied for loans received nothing.

The Democrats again voted virtually unanimously for the Trump administration measure. In supporting it, they dropped their demands that it include financial aid to the states and localities and additional money for food stamps.

Following the passage of that bill, McConnell suggested that rather than providing funds for state and local governments, Congress pass legislation allowing states to declare bankruptcy. He specifically pointed to massive public employee pension deficits in states such as Illinois and said he would oppose any federal money going to prop up pension systems. State bankruptcies, currently barred by law, would allow state governments to slash the

pensions of current retirees.

Moody’s Analytics has warned that states may face combined deficits of \$158 billion to \$203 billion through the 2021 fiscal year. More than 2,100 cities across the country expect budget deficits this year. The bipartisan National Governors Association has called for \$500 billion in federal aid, and last week Pelosi suggested a figure of \$1 trillion.

A whole series of Democratic governors and mayors have begun cutting social spending and declared that unless they receive federal help, they will carry out brutal cuts in public employees’ jobs and benefits and unprecedented attacks on education, health care, public transit and other vital social services. Not one has even broached the possibility of raising taxes on businesses and the wealthy.

New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy said last month that without federal support his state would not go bankrupt. Instead, he declared, “We will just cut, cut, cut and cut.”

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that he would slash over \$2 billion in city services over the next year. He plans to close public pools, reduce sanitation pickups, suspend the summer youth employment program and impose a hiring freeze.

Having enacted the massive corporate bailout and reversed the plunge on the stock market in March, neither big-business party exhibits any great urgency in passing a new pandemic bill supposedly focused on providing aid to working people devastated by the economic impact of the crisis. As Kudlow told CNN last week, “There’s kind of a pause period right now.”

This is despite the obvious fact that the supposed gains for workers in the previous bills—a one-time cash stipend and extended unemployment benefits with an additional \$600 a week provided by the US Treasury—have turned out to be illusory for millions of workers who have received neither.

Now, in conjunction with the socially criminal “return to work” frenzy, the Democrats are preparing to work out a deal with Trump and the Republicans that will initiate a new, brutal round of austerity and shield the ruling class from any accountability for its negligent and murderous response to the pandemic.



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